

HMD 2012 – **Speak Up, Speak Out**

‘First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out...’ So begins the famous poem of 1946 by Pastor Niemoller. It’s a poem which many know and highlights the dangers of not speaking up when we experience, see or hear injustice. If we do not use our voices we run the risk of having them taken away; the poem ends ‘Then they came for me, and there was no-one left to speak out for me’.

Everyone should have a fundamental human right to freedom of speech. Each of us has a voice and has the choice to use it. The choices we make in the words and language we use every day contribute to creating a safe and fair society. The right to speak up may seem an uncomplicated concept, but the Untold Stories of the past have shown us that voices have been taken away, and are ignored or still silenced today. Holocaust Memorial Day – 27 January 2012 – asks us all to **Speak Up, Speak Out** to share the lessons of the past and the present and to use our voices to create a safer and better future.

During the Nazi regime of hatred (1933 – 1945), the voices of so many were taken away. Jewish men, women and children were stripped of their right to speak up, to have their own home, to work, to own a radio, attend school and keep their own name, among other restrictions placed on them. Many other groups and individuals were persecuted during this period, Trade Unions were disbanded removing the voice of workers, Gypsies were rounded up and sent to concentration camps, and those who spoke out against the regime were often imprisoned or murdered. During the genocide in Cambodia, ownership of a radio was made illegal, as it was for Jews under the Nazi regime. Time and again, in genocides in Rwanda, Armenia, Bosnia and in Darfur, people have had their voices taken away, others have not spoken up and lives have been changed beyond recognition.

Whilst these atrocities have taken place, many have stood idly by and did not speak out against persecution and discrimination. None of us know what we would do if we were faced with a life threatening decision, but we can hope that we will do what is right. Today, we can choose not to be a bystander. We can use the inspiration of those who have spoken up to help others in the past as our motivation to speak out today. We can all learn to use our voices to protect the human rights of all.

Today, we have a remarkable opportunity to **Speak Up, Speak Out** in many different ways. As well as telling others our opinion, we can start social media campaigns; we can record our views on film and audio and upload these to websites and blogs. We can write to those in power, expressing our opinion and we can organise or join demonstrations and protests to support what we believe in. We can choose to speak up through the language we use – we can make the choice to use our voices for prevention, not persecution. In playgrounds, many are using the words ‘gay’ and ‘Jew’ as a derogatory term of offence – we can all choose to challenge those who do this within our hearing. We can urge those who have been attacked or abused on our streets to report what has happened to them.

Deciding to speak up is not always an easy decision. In a minority of cases, those who have spoken up have suffered retribution. David Kato, a gay rights activist in Uganda chose to speak out and successfully sued a Ugandan newspaper in 2010 after they printed a photograph of him and other gay men under the headline ‘Hang them’. A few weeks after this ruling, David was murdered. This is an extreme case, but we must make sure we continue to speak up. David was doing so in a country where it remains illegal to be gay.

However, we live in a society where we are able to celebrate the diversity within our communities and encourage change, free from the dangers of state-sponsored hatred. Here in the UK, we see people choosing to speak out and make a difference in our schools and neighbourhoods.

There are voices from the past and present which can inspire our choices:

The Rosenstraße protests of 1943 when the German wives of 1,600 Jewish men who had been held in Rose Street, Berlin spoke up and secured their release.

The story of Dr Ludwig Guttman, the founder of the Paralympics, was a Jewish doctor who fled Germany in 1939 to seek refuge in England. His work with disabled people led him to establish the Paralympics. He spoke up for the rights of disabled people to be given the same opportunities in the sporting arena as other athletes.

British Diplomat, Mukesh Kapila who was head of the UN in Sudan witnessed the start of the genocide in Darfur in April 2004 and alerted the international media even though it cost him his career.

Holocaust survivor, Iby Knill was imprisoned as a political prisoner in Hungary and was later deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She made a promise to a dying Gypsy girl to tell the story of the persecution of the Roma. Today, she speaks to hundreds of people each year to ensure that the crimes of the past are never again repeated.

Henry Obstfeld's rescuers, the Klerks found room in their lives and hearts for a 2 ½ year old Jewish child, whom they sheltered until he was 5. His foster father, Jacob, was a dedicated Freemason, who chose to speak up against the restrictions placed on him by protecting another who was persecuted.

It is not only individuals who choose and work to **Speak Up, Speak Out**. The works of many charitable organisations give voices to the voiceless. **Survivors Fund** works to ensure that the memory of the 1994 genocide is not forgotten and to create a safer future for Rwandans. **Aegis Trust** campaigns against genocide, and has used its knowledge to bring a change to laws in the UK which enables those who have committed genocide and live here now, to be brought to justice. The **Holocaust Survivors Friendship Association**, based in the North East of England is working to encourage young people to listen to the voices of Holocaust survivors. **Most Mira** work in the Prijedor region of Bosnia to bring together young people who are still affected by the Bosnian war of 1992-1995. **Mencap** run a *Get My Vote* campaign which seeks to have the voices and needs of those with learning disabilities heard and met in politics and elections. The **British Youth Council** works with young people in the UK ensuring that their voices and hopes are heard and acted upon.

As the world focuses on the UK in the Olympic year of 2012, we must use our voices to speak up. Discrimination and exclusion are still rife in our communities, we hear of stories of atrocity across the world, yet some remain bystanders. Now it is time for us, irrespective of our background, to speak up for what we believe in, for what we understand to be right. Together, we can learn the lessons of the past to create a safer, better future. On HMD 2012 we must come together to **Speak Up, Speak Out**.